

THE
INFERNAL
MASCULINE
AND
OTHER COMEDIES

—
ALFRED
BRAND

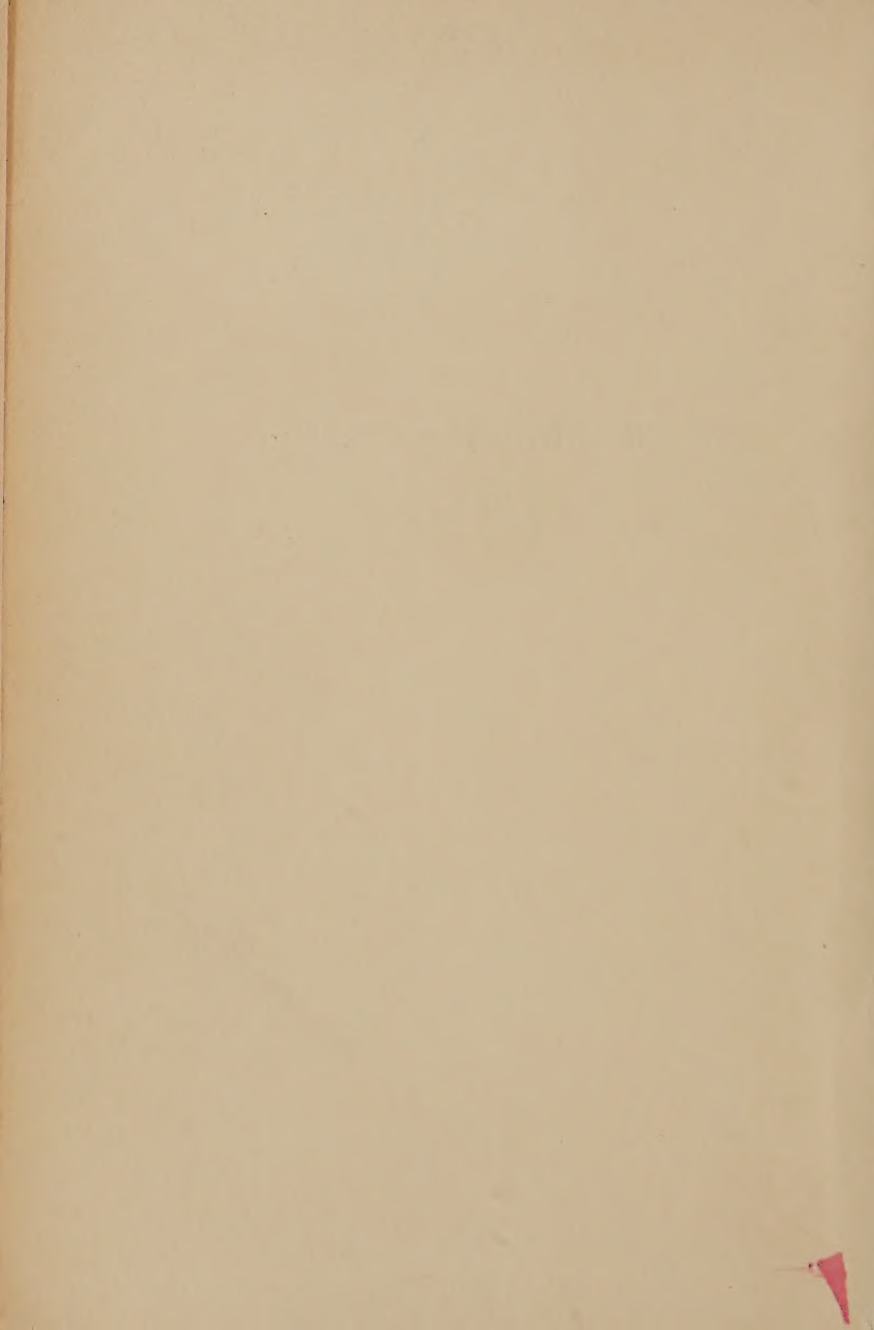
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THE INFERNAL MASCULINE



The Infernal Masculine *and* Other Comedies

ALFRED BRAND



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THE INFERNAL MASCULINE

CHARACTERS:

MRS. CHARLES GAY

MRS. TOM DALLETT

WYNNE CARTER

JULIA

PLACE: NEW YORK

TIME: THE PRESENT

SCENE: MRS. GAY'S DRESSING ROOM

THE INFERNAL MASCULINE

(A charming apartment with panelled walls and furniture of ivory enamel. The carpet, hangings, coverings and bracket shades are of a delicate rose color. At lower right is a fireplace flanked by a chaise-longue, a table at the right of it and at the left an armchair. At center rear, a door leads to the hall, at upper left the door of a closet, and at lower left a door opening into Mrs. Gay's bedroom—between these two is a dressing table. At left of rear door is a chest of drawers and at left of bedroom door is a silk-covered hat stand on which hangs a lace boudoir cap. At extreme lower left a table with a lamp, telephone, etc. Scattered about the room are an evening gown, a wrap, slippers, scarf, etc. Mrs. Gay enters from the bedroom followed by Julia carrying a breakfast tray. Mrs. Gay is an attractive woman of thirty-eight but appears somewhat younger. She is wearing a soft filmy negligee of white with a broad girdle of rose ribbon tied at the back in a huge butterfly bow.)

MRS. GAY

Bring it in here, Julia, I'll have my breakfast by the fire. *(Sits on the chaise-longue — Julia arranges the tray on the table at her elbow)* I wish I might eat a real breakfast just once. Am I getting fat, Julia, do you think?

JULIA

Oh, Mrs. Gay! (*She takes up cover to throw over Mrs. Gay.*)

MRS. GAY

And don't cover my feet! I think they look particularly well this morning.

JULIA

Oh, yes, they do, Mrs. Gay — and the negligee is so lovely! Shall I put away your things later?

MRS. GAY

No, do it now. I forgot the room was in such a litter. (*Munches her toast*) Did anyone call up this morning?

JULIA

Yes, ma'am, I think it was Mr. Carter.

MRS. GAY

Don't you know?

JULIA

No, ma'am, the young gentleman wouldn't leave his name.

MRS. GAY

(*With affected indifference*) It was probably someone else then. (*Julia laughs knowingly to herself.*) You seem exceptionally cheerful this morning, Julia. Has Larkin proposed to you again?

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. (*During the following dialogue Julia picks up the scattered things, carefully arranges them and puts them away in the closet and the chest of drawers.*)

MRS. GAY

Is that why?

JULIA

Well — it's nice to know you still have a man where you want him. Of course I don't mean to marry him.

MRS. GAY

That's good news, at least. I was afraid I might have to make a change. I don't mind new cooks or new chauffeurs or things like that, but I can't stand new fingers messing up my clothes. You're just beginning to be the way I like you, Julia, so be careful about Larkin.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. I'm glad you feel that way about changing cooks though, Mrs. Gay, because I think Mary will be leaving soon. (*Giggles*) She's engaged.

MRS. GAY

(*Setting down her cup*) Good Heavens! Is that old fool in love, too?

JULIA

Oh, it isn't love with Mary, ma'am, it's just plain marriage. He's a plumber with \$35 a week, and he looks like he was kind of easy to handle. Mary says the only

man she ever saw *much* of was Tomlins, and somehow you can't boss a butler.

MRS. GAY

Yes, I've noticed that.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am, Of course it's all right for Mary — she's sort of built for family life. She says I'm a fool not to take Larkin. You know, most maids consider chauffeurs as class — they get good money. But I couldn't do much with Larkin's hundred-and-fifty, not making any myself. (*Reflecting*) Of course a chauffeur *isn't* home much, but —

MRS. GAY

Julia, you're cold-blooded.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am, it gives you a very safe feeling to be that way.

MRS. GAY

So you haven't any of the normal womanly yearning for a home and family?

JULIA

Oh, Mrs. Gay, I'm quite satisfied with the home I have. As for a family, that's one danger I hope to keep out of, married or unmarried.

MRS. GAY

Julia, you're impossible!

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. But there's one thing I've learned for certain — you only really *have* a man *before* you get him, not afterward.

MRS. GAY

There's something in that. — Is Larkin very nice to you?

JULIA

Oh, Mrs. Gay, you wouldn't know it was him. He acts like he was training for the movies. He raves about my eyes and my hair, and puts on a long face till he looks more like a sheep than a chauffeur. I told him my eyes and hair might be bothering him now, but it's my hands and feet he'd be worrying about if I married him. Sometimes he has me almost fooled, but the minute I'm alone I know what his trouble is.

MRS. GAY

(*Amused*) What *is* his trouble?

JULIA

He's tired of making his own bed, for one thing.

MRS. GAY

Julia!

JULIA

Yes, and he's tired of wearing filigree socks, and he'd like his own lunch-counter where he could eat with his coat off. They're all alike, ma'am, but thank Fortune most of them get fooled — before or after.

MRS. GAY

And we're here to do it, I suppose?

JULIA

(*Seriously*) Yes, ma'am. It's Woman's Work, you might say!

MRS. GAY

(*Laughing*) Rather a large order the Lord has given us to fill!

JULIA

Yes, but the Lord favors us, Mrs. Gay. He puts us into the world all trained and ready for the work — but the men — well, by the time a man has learned to hide his thoughts from a woman, he's too old to make her heart beat.

MRS. GAY

(*To herself*) If only *we* didn't have to grow old, too!

JULIA

Oh, you oughtn't to lose heart, Mrs. Gay, you've been so successful and — (*stops, frightened.*)

MRS. GAY

(*Sharply*) That will do, Julia!

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. I beg your pardon, ma'am.
(*A bell rings — Mrs. Gay sits up quickly.*)

MRS. GAY

Someone's coming. Take away the breakfast things, and hurry, Julia. (*Julia takes the tray.*) And, Julia, see who it is.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. (*She goes out, rear.*)

(*Mrs. Gay takes a book at random from the table, carefully arranges herself on the sofa, leans her head on her right hand — her left, holding the book, droops over the side — she gazes pensively into the fire.*)

JULIA

(*Enters*) Mrs. Dallett is calling, ma'am.

MRS. GAY

(*Disappointed — breaks her pose*) Oh, Mrs. Dallett! Well, show her up. (*Julia disappears.*) (*Mrs. Gay flings the book on the floor and sits up — Mrs. Dallett enters — she is a smart, attractive woman in the thirties — with much self-assurance.*)

MRS. GAY

Hello.

MRS. DALLETT

Hello, Fan! I can't stay but a minute. How sweet you look. (*They kiss — Mrs. Dallett sits in arm-chair — sees book on the floor*) Reading? I didn't know you ever did.

FANNY

Meaning what?

GRACE

Oh, nothing disagreeable. Only I never knew you to be hard up for amusement, and one doesn't go to *books* for knowledge, these days. Any of your good Russian cigs around?

FANNY

Here you are. (*Passes cigarettes to Mrs. Dallett and takes one herself — they light them.*)

GRACE

I'm on a rakish errand this morning, Fan.

FANNY

Again?

GRACE

Uh-huh. You've heard of Takacz, haven't you? Rafael Takacz?

FANNY

The portrait painter?

GRACE

Yes, the Hungarian — the man of the hour — the Rolls-Royce among painters — paints at a thousand dollars an ounce. Well, I met him at Lucy Van Ruyn's. You know he did her portrait, the queerest thing you ever saw. It's art of the twenty-first century, no attempt at a physical likeness, you understand — just a picture of her soul. Lucy's soul looks like a potato sack full of dark secrets, so of course she's tremendously pleased. Well to cut it short, he made desperate love to me first chance. I encouraged him — just a wee bit — and he gave me a whispered bid to visit him at his studio.

FANNY

A wee bit seems to go a long way with him!

GRACE

Of course I refused. Then he began the usual bid for sympathy — how he was stifling in New York — beautiful women, many of them, but nothing beyond their bodies. He was losing his grip, nothing would save him but the privilege of painting me.

FANNY

Business man, too!

GRACE

I admit that staggered me for a minute. I had to convey it to him delicately that I couldn't afford to buy even a peek at my immortal soul. That brought on more lamentation and he was dreadfully hurt. It was to be a picture not for the public, no — no —, but the best that was in him, the salvation of his art — an inspiration to keep him forever from slipping in the dark places — like New York.

FANNY

You mean, he's to keep it himself?

GRACE

So he suggested, so he probably thinks, poor thing! But it's mine as if I already had it under lock and key. Trust me for that. Rather neat, I think, getting a masterpiece for nothing.

FANNY

Nothing?

GRACE

Nothing of value, you may rest assured. But I hope the idiot kisses my *left* hand today, he nearly crippled my right on Wednesday.

FANNY

So you've had a sitting?

GRACE

One — and another this morning.

FANNY

Well, Grace, if the man's such a fiend for kissing, remember you have only two hands — and you'll have to have a third sitting, at least.

GRACE

Yes, but I've made a lot of rash promises in my day — they'll tide me over till my picture is safely hung at home. In other words (*dramatically*), till I can call my soul my own!

FANNY

And the world has the nerve to rant about idle women! There isn't any such thing as an idle woman — we're all too busy with Woman's Work.

GRACE

Where did you get that, and what is it?

FANNY

It's Julia's expression. She's putting the thumb-screws to Larkin, my chauffeur. Grace, the Eternal

Feminine is more than a phrase, it's a league with a universal membership.

GRACE

Not very exclusive, this league of yours.

FANNY

Ours! The cook has her plumber, the maid her chauffeur, and the idle woman her — painter of souls.

GRACE

(*Meaningly*) Or her schoolboy.

FANNY

Schoolboy!

GRACE

Oh, cut it, Fan. I can tell when you're on the war-path — I've seen you before. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you with that Carter boy at Sherry's the other day. You fairly had him by the throat.

FANNY

What a vulgar expression!

GRACE

Well, it's true. But, Fan, you're not really serious about that! (*Fanny eyes her cigarette, smiling.*) Are you?

FANNY

Perhaps.

GRACE

I can't believe it. Of course the "cutie" proposition is not exactly a licensed game, but there are a *few* rules.

FANNY

For instance?

GRACE

Well — anything between the cradle and the wheel-chair is fair game — but Fan, a half-baked baby like that!

FANNY

I don't know whether you realize just how funny this is — a lecture from *you*, of all people!

GRACE

Oh, I don't know. Leaving the victim's age out of the discussion, there *is* a little difference between our cases.

FANNY

Just what?

GRACE

Well, our precious husbands, to begin with. Tom makes the thing rather easy for me. He scatters his own affections far and wide and with no attempt at secrecy. When I am at my worst his reputation makes me look like a holy pilgrim. In my intermissions as a model wife I enjoy all the comforts of an injured woman, and when I'm cavorting myself, I can always feel that I am merely paying him back. Either way, my conscience sleeps peacefully on. Now with you, there's Charles — well, there you have it, Charles — did anyone ever dream of calling him Chick or Chuck, or even Charlie?

FANNY

Good heavens! He'd die of fright.

GRACE

Well, then, with a steady, hard-working, moral mate like that, *is* there as much excuse for you?

FANNY

My dear, I never look for excuses. They are too easy to find. Besides, it isn't my fault if Charles prefers to ornament the background. He has a background nature, I haven't.

GRACE

Yes, and the background is always in your range of vision. What would you say if Charles were forever popping out over the horizon, like Tom?

FANNY

I wish he would, sometimes!

GRACE

Well, of course you don't look your age, but you *are* old enough to be the boy's mother. Is it quite fair?

FANNY

(*Irritated*) Everything's fair in love and war — there's *some* comfort in the old saw.

GRACE

But, Fan, he's a mere child!

FANNY

What of it? He's twenty-one. The game laws can't protect him after that.

GRACE

I won't put it on moral grounds, then, but you know the young ones never can shut up about their first affairs. Besides, if he's as far gone as he seemed the other day, he's apt to make a scene somewhere.

FANNY

He won't, but if he or any of the others ever did, that is where my beautiful background would come in — just a few well-chosen tears, and Charles would end up by being the guiltiest of the three.

GRACE

Is it really as simple as all that?

FANNY

Yes, it is — and so is Charles. (*Rises and crosses to dressing table — she powders her nose and fusses with her hair*) Grace, I have never caught my pets young enough. I don't mean to make that mistake again. They're harder to train and you sometimes lose them before you're quite through with them. Besides, I'll confess to you, but this is not for publication — I'm getting old enough to play safe. Youth is the biggest gun in the battle of hearts, and my heavy artillery is getting rusty. The worst of it is, when a man's had his baptism of fire he begins to invent new tricks of warfare, and a woman of thirty-eight is no good on the defensive.

Hereafter I stick to the raw recruits. (*Comes back to sofa*) I get more adoration from Wynne than I ever had before, and what he lacks in finesse he makes up in enthusiasm. It has the same thrill, and, Grace — it's so safe!

GRACE

But, my dear, all pets have to be fed. You'll have to throw a sop of some kind even to that Carter baby if you want to keep him burning.

FANNY

That's just the ridiculous part of it, it's so easy. You know they have put the boy into business and it has nearly killed his poetic soul. He has apparently conceived the idea that the only thing necessary to a career is to meet socially every man of money who comes into range. A few weeks ago at Jane Winter's dance I presented him to a half-dozen of his idols. He was quite overwhelmed — spoke a few eager words with each one and nearly wept afterward when he thanked me.

GRACE

Poor little fool!

FANNY

Then about a week ago he was so down in the mouth one evening, I took him into a corner and made him tell me his troubles. He said he had had an awful calling-down for not making good. It's an advertising business he's in — I didn't know they could make a business of *that* — he said he simply couldn't put his heart in his work, he was always thinking about me, and his father was so keen on his making good he felt an awful failure.

He seemed almost ready for suicide, so I asked him if I couldn't help him through Charles. He wouldn't listen to it — he said Gay-Warner and Co. *did* advertise some, but he couldn't think of that — couldn't bear to associate me with coarse material things. Just the same, I did speak to Charles about it and I made the boy go to see him. This morning Charles said he was going to give him a contract or something like that. Grace, that boy is going to feel in debt to me all the rest of his life. Why you couldn't scare that much gratitude out of your Hungarian Rafael, no matter what you did.

GRACE

Why, Fan, the child's a plain idiot!

FANNY

I know it. He's so foolish he's thrilling. He's a new type.

GRACE

And when are the tears of thanks to be shed?

FANNY

This morning, I think. He called yesterday, and I wouldn't see him, so he phoned and begged me to let him come today. I said "No," positively, so I expect him any minute.

GRACE

(*Rising*) Well I had better be trotting along then. I don't want to meet the calf coming to slaughter.

FANNY

Grace, you're positively coarse!

GRACE

Just graphic, that's all. (*Looks at her watch*) Heavens! My little fluffy-topped Rafael will be beside himself. I'm a half-hour late now. (*Hurries toward door rear*) Bye-bye, dear.

FANNY

Good bye! (*Bell rings — Grace stops at door.*)

GRACE

There's your little victim now. (*Hurriedly*) I'll see you this evening, won't I?

FANNY

Yes, I had nearly forgotten about that.

GRACE

I'll swap you stories then.

FANNY

All right, but hurry along. (*Grace goes out — Julia enters.*)

JULIA

It's Mr. Carter, ma'am.

FANNY

Oh, dear, I shall have to see him, I suppose. (*Resigned*) Well, show him up then, Julia. (*Julia goes out with a "you-can't fool-me" expression — Fanny picks up the book and takes her former pose.*)

(Julia ushers in Wynne Carter — he places his coat and hat on chair at right of door, and waits while Julia closes the door slowly. Carter has the look of the average fresh, clear-eyed college lad of twenty-one, an appearance which is belied by his conversation and manner. He speaks in a low intense voice and seems to be overcome by the wonder and novelty of his own emotions — crosses quickly to Fanny.)

WYNNE

Oh, Fanny, it was wonderful of you to see me this morning. *(She smiles languorously at him.)* I know I had no right to come, but I couldn't help it. You aren't angry with me? *(He draws the chair close to the sofa.)*

FANNY

No, of course not!

WYNNE

(Takes her hand) Oh, how could you turn me away like that! You couldn't have if you had known what these last two days meant to me.

FANNY

(Turns her face toward the fire) I've been wondering whether it might not be better to turn back in time.

WYNNE

(Still holds her hand — sorrowfully) I couldn't turn back. It's too late for that — I'm gone!

FANNY

Not even for my sake?

WYNNE

(*Worried*) Do you mean I'm putting you in danger of being talked about?

FANNY

Wynn timer, there are more dangerous things than being talked about.

WYNNE

Oh, Fanny, do you mean —

FANNY

Hush, please don't! (*He kisses her hand passionately.*)

WYNNE

Mrs. Dallett passed me as she went out. She smiled at me so oddly — you don't think she suspects?

FANNY

Of course not, silly boy! Come, I shall have to send you away soon, let's forget everything unpleasant and try to be happy — a little bit.

WYNNE

A little bit! Oh! (*He kisses her hand again, spies the book on the floor, leans over and picks it up.*) What have you been reading? Oh, don't you adore them? (*Fanny is worried — she has no idea which book she used in her pose — Wynne reads the title*) "Indian Love Lyrics!" (*Fanny is relieved.*)

FANNY

It's curious how much I found in them this time — things I missed before.

WYNNE

You'd think me awfully silly if I told you I had tried to write a poem, wouldn't you?

FANNY

(Reproachfully) Wynnie!

WYNNE

Because I did — I've got it here. *(Touches his heart with his hand, then takes a folded sheet from his inner pocket)* I want you to read it after I have gone, will you?

FANNY

Won't you read it to me?

WYNNE

Do you really want me to? *(Leans towards her and reads in a low, impassioned voice.)*

“ My soul its secret has, my life too has its mystery —
A love eternal in a moment's space conceived;
And she who was the cause nor knew it nor believed.
Alas, I shall have passed close by her unperceived,
Forever at her side and yet forever lonely —
I shall unto the end have made Life's journey, only
Daring to ask for naught, and having naught received.
For her, though God has made her gentle and en-
dearing,

She will go on her way distraught and without hearing
These murmurings of love that round her steps ascend,
Piously faithful still unto her duty,
Will say, when she shall read these lines full of her
 beauty,
' Who can this woman be? ' and will not comprehend."

FANNY

Oh, Wynn timer, it's lovely! When did you do it?

WYNNE

Last night. I know it's not worthy of you — it's crude in form and meter and all that, but, Fanny, I put my whole heart into it!

FANNY

That's all that really matters, Wynn timer. It was wonderful of you. But why did you say " Will not comprehend? " Don't you think I do?

WYNNE

You couldn't, Fanny — not absolutely. Why I care so much for you, it's like a pain — it hurts.

FANNY

Now, boy, you mustn't suffer — at least not here. You promised to be a bit happy this morning. (*He leans toward her — she rises quickly and crosses left*) Wynn timer, you mustn't really!

WYNNE

(*Gazes after her raptly*) Oh, what a beautiful gown!

FANNY

(*Turns*) It isn't really a gown.

WYNNE

I don't care what it is, it's lovely! You look like a great big wonderful butterfly!

FANNY

(*Teasing*) Great big!

WYNNE

Ah, you're torturing me again — you know what I meant. You *are* like a butterfly — so gorgeous, so alive, and yet so unreal! (*Fanny is pleased.*) I wish I might call you that — “Butterfly” — may I?

FANNY

If you promise to call me that only when we're alone.

WYNNE

Oh, I will! Nobody in the world shall ever hear it — my butterfly! (*Rises and goes over to her*) Won't you come back? I'll promise to be good. I can't bear to have you so far away from me. (*Leads her back to the sofa.*)

FANNY

(*Sits — Wynne holds both her hands*) Boy, let's talk about other things for a bit — it will be better for both of us. Tell me about yourself. What have you been doing the last few days?

WYNNE

You know without my telling it — just thinking and wishing and talking to myself about you.

FANNY

You're hopeless! Haven't you been at your office at all?

WYNNE

(Drops her hands and buries his face in his own) Ah, it's no use! I thought I could forget about that horrible place, at least during these few precious moments with you, but you've brought it all back to me!

FANNY

Poor boy, do you loathe it so?

WYNNE

(Dismally) This morning I caught it again. It's no use, I'm not cut out for that sort of thing. If only there were no such thing as money in the world! If people only *could* live on love, I'd be a millionaire. I'd carry you off, and we'd live like the king and queen in the fairy-tale. This morning, after a night of dreams, I awakened feeling like Aladdin himself. I rode down town hanging on a strap, and I might have been floating on the magic carpet. Then I opened a door and closed it behind me, and *(miserably)* I was only a little kitchen knave to be kicked about and scolded and made fun of. *(Bitterly)* Just because I wasn't making good!

FANNY

Poor child! Then Charles didn't really help you any?

WYNNE

(*Blankly*) Charles! — Mr. Gay?

FANNY

Yes, didn't you know? He told me this morning he had decided to give you that contract.

WYNNE

(*Eagerly*) Really? Do you mean it?

FANNY

Of course. Didn't you know?

WYNNE

(*Laughing*) Oh, it's too wonderful for words! (*He stops suddenly, then sinks back dejectedly*) But I can't. I couldn't do it! I'd be ashamed.

FANNY

Ashamed? Why?

WYNNE

Oh, of course, there isn't anything really wrong about this — but we wouldn't want Mr. Gay to know *everything* we've done and said, would we?

FANNY

(*Hesitatingly*) No — but you mustn't feel that way. After all, love justifies itself. Any means to a *good* end!

WYNNE

Do you really mean that? I'm so glad you said that — it takes an awful load off my mind.

FANNY

Wynn timer, you're so old-fashioned!

WYNNE

Forgive me, Butterfly, you see I'm too young to be modern. But — Mr. Gay wouldn't agree with you about the means justifying the end, would he?

FANNY

No, the victim never does agree. The point is, be careful not to be the victim.

WYNNE

You *will* be careful, won't you?

FANNY

Trust me for that, Wynn timer. (*Pauses — he gazes at her steadily*) Why do you look at me like that?

WYNNE

I was just thinking how terrible it would be to see you the victim of anything. You have always had everything you wanted — fine clothes — money — fine motors — love —

FANNY

(*Laughing*) Heavens! Why think about such things? Wynnie, you're depressing. Stop it!

WYNNE

(*Clasping his head in his hands*) Oh-h-h-h!

FANNY

What's the matter?

WYNNE

(*In pain*) Too much excitement, I guess — too much happiness — too much misery. I have a beastly splitting headache!

FANNY

(*Rises*) Oh, you poor child, let me get you something for it.

WYNNE

No, please don't leave me.

FANNY

I'll be back in a moment, Lie down here, come, and I'll get you a headache tablet. (*She draws him gently to the sofa and makes him lie down — lays her hand on his forehead — he kisses it.*)

WYNNE

Don't be long, will you?

FANNY

(*Crosses left*) Not a minute. Lie still like a good boy. (*Goes into bedroom — closes the door — Wynne jumps up and rushes to the phone — speaks rapidly in a subdued voice.*)

WYNNE

Hello, give me Longacre one-five-seven-nine. Yes, please, in a hurry. Hello, I want to speak to Mr. Grant—hello — Jimmie, this is Wynne talking, — heard anything from Gay-Warner? (*Pause*) What! — just now? — they *did* — they *have*! (*Ecstatically*) Oh, mama! None of your damn business where I am. (*He puts up the receiver and executes a few wild steps to the accompaniment of a subdued "tyah-tyah-tyah —" he suddenly remembers Fanny and hurries across to sofa — makes it and sits down just as Fanny enters with a glass of water and the tablet.*)

FANNY

You haven't been quiet, naughty boy, you'll make your head worse.

WYNNE

(*Gleefully*) It's gone!

FANNY

What!

WYNNE

Fact, it's gone. (*Crosses to her — takes the glass and tablet, puts them quickly on the table and goes back.*) Now then, it's no use, I've got to kiss you. (*He hugs her roughly and kisses her several times — she struggles.*)

FANNY

Wynn timer, you reckless child!

WYNNE

(*Releasing her*) Didn't you want me to?

FANNY

Oh — yes — I suppose so. But you're progressing too rapidly. Come now and sit down quietly, and remember, butterflies — must — not — be — crumpled! (*Sits.*)

WYNNE

Worse things can happen to butterflies. I might put a pin through you and stick you up for a specimen.

FANNY

(*Uneasily*) What has come over you?

WYNNE

Of course I would hate to do that because I don't like dead ones — and I love to see you flutter.

FANNY

Silly! (*Eyes her cigarette — tries to get the conversation back into its former channel.*) Wynnie, I didn't like the way you kissed me just then.

WYNNE

I'm sorry. Shall I try another way?

FANNY

Don't you dare! — I don't understand you, Wynnie, you make me almost afraid.

WYNNE

You afraid, Butterfly? Of what?

FANNY

I don't know, exactly. But I never saw such a remarkable change in anyone.

WYNNE

Oh, yes, but such remarkable things happened while you were away.

FANNY

(*Amused*) What! In just that little minute?

WYNNE

Um-huh.

FANNY

What?

WYNNE

(*Helps himself to a cigarette — coolly*) I telephoned.
(*He lights it.*)

FANNY

Telephoned? To whom?

WYNNE

The office.

FANNY

(*Laughs*) Boy, I don't understand you at all. You're in a perfect jumble of moods this morning, flying from one thing to another. (*Looking up at him archly*) You can't mix business and — love, like that, you know!

WYNNE

(*Brazenly*) That depends on how good a little mixer you are. I think I'd better explain things a bit. You re-

member telling me a few minutes ago what Mr. Gay said about that contract? — well, when you left the room I rang up the office and —

FANNY

(*Interrupting — ominously*) You lied about your headache!

WYNNE

(*Hurt*) I believe you're sorry I didn't have one! (*Fanny gasps*) Well, to continue, I rang up the office and they said the whole thing was fixed and signed and settled this morning — in fact, all over but the shouting, and that's *my* work. And to think I owe it all to you, Butterfly! You know, I believe I really *could* love you forever!

FANNY

(*Makes a last effort to bring Wynne back to a sentimental mood — meltingly*) You quaint child, does this really mean so much to you?

WYNNE

(*Eagerly*) Do you want to know how much? Fifteen hundred a year raise — that's a hundred per cent., a new position — big prestige in the firm. Why, we've spent oodles of money to land Gay-Warner — and I've swung the deal in one month, and not a bit of expense! I'm ashamed to go back to the office — I'll be such a big noise around there.

FANNY

(*Bewildered*) Do you mean to say an advertising contract can mean that much?

WYNNE

Some of them do. This one does — including future prospects. But, Butterfly, it isn't fair of you to belittle your husband's business like that. Of course, there were one or two other things that helped — you remember the golden introductions you gave me at Mrs. Winter's dance? I followed up two of those to a successful finish. All in all, I'm the rising youngster in my firm, and I owe it all to you, every penny of the fifteen hundred!

FANNY

(Now realizing the situation — choking with rage) Oh! Oh — you — you — BRAT!

WYNNE

(Laughing) Oh, you're so funny, Fanny! Ha—ha—, “funny-Fanny” — sounds like a nursery rhyme, doesn't it?

FANNY

(Trying to control herself) Well, that's more in your line than *this* kind of — twaddle! *(Picks up Wynne's verses and throws them on the floor.)*

WYNNE

Oh, I'd forgotten. I shall have to confess about that — I don't want to leave you with any false impressions. *(Confidentially)* You know, I'm really not a poet at all. I copied that out of a book last night — Longfellow, the only book of poems I could find in the house. Longfellow's so old-fashioned I knew you wouldn't recognize it.

FANNY

Oh, I can't believe it! I — (*she rises and paces the floor* — *Wynne retreats left and straddles the dressing-table chair* — *Fanny stops center and turns on him*) You wretch! You impudent little puppy! I might have known you were like all the rest. So it was for your nasty little contract, for a few paltry dollars that you played that pretty part with me! (*More excitedly*) You dared to make love to me, to win my confidence, you used your baby face and your smooth tongue to make me think you were different, to disarm me. You had no respect for my feelings, for my reputation — you were perfectly willing to compromise me if necessary — for what? (*Scornfully*) For money! For a raise in wages!

WYNNE

(*Correcting her*) Salary!

FANNY

(*Sits in chair right*) Is there a man in the world who isn't just a beast of prey? What chance has any woman when even the children are without honor?

WYNNE

(*As if repentant*) I'm so sorry, Butterfly. I've made a terrible mistake. If I had only realized I was taking advantage of you, that I was forcing my attentions on you — but I didn't, I lost my head. (*Ruefully*) In my rashness I even imagined you were almost — shall I say, leading me on?

FANNY

(*Explosively*) How dare you say that to me!

WYNNE

(*Coolly*) How dared you say "any means to a good end," if you didn't mean it?

FANNY

(*Makes a great effort to control herself*) All I can say now is, for your own punishment, I hope you will some day realize what a scoundrel you are!

WYNNE

(*Brazenly*) I admit it was a pretty clever piece of acting — but you mustn't blame it all on my criminal nature. You see, I was considered one of the star actors in the Dramatic Club at New Haven. This little sketch gave me a chance to keep my hand in —

FANNY

(*Frigidly*) Have you finished?

WYNNE

Not quite. There was just one thing more. When I got out of college last June, the old man gave me two pieces of advice. One was about money — he said: "You've got to work for it." The other was about women. He said: "I won't order you to keep away from them, because every man makes a fool of himself once, but there are degrees of foolishness. If you run away with some lisping baby-faced doll with her hair down her back, you'll have my sympathy *and* my forgiveness — if I have to heal the heart-wounds of some chorus-girl with a check, I'll give you hell and I *might* forgive you —

but if you ever get tangled up with any middle-aged Candida, you can pack your trunk and beat it!" (*Fanny glares*) So I gave that some thought and it struck me that if you want to win at any game you've got to learn to play it first. That's where you come in again. I'm safe now, and I thank you. (*Rises.*)

FANNY

(*In a cold fury*) I can't endure any more! Go — go now, as fast as you can!

WYNNE

(*Goes up stage*) I was about to do that little thing. (*Picks up his hat and coat — turns*) Anyway, we've both profited by this. You have found out that we men are just a bunch of unscrupulous rakes, and I've learned that I'm too young to play with butterflies — so I think I'll marry a certain cute little cocoon I know and give her a chance to reform me. (*Fanny sits rigidly with her back toward him — he goes out, then opens the door and puts in his head — coaxingly, as to a child*) And, Butterfly, — rest your wings — you might want to fly again — some time! (*Exit, closing the door behind him.*)

FANNY

(*Bursts into angry tears*) Oh, the beast! The ungrateful, cold-blooded little beast! (*Throws herself face-down on the sofa and kicks her heels with rage — Julia enters in high spirits*) Julia! (*Julia stops center.*) What time is it?

JULIA

Just twelve o'clock, ma'am. (*She takes her mistress in then begins to smile — Fanny looks up.*)

FANNY

(*Angrily*) What are you laughing at?

JULIA

I wasn't laughing, ma'am. I'm just feeling cheerful.

FANNY

(*Sits up*) What right have you to be cheerful? (*Julia is indignant.*) Ring up Mrs. Dallett's house and say that I am very ill and will not be able to come to dinner tonight.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. (*Starts toward telephone.*)

FANNY

(*Sharply*) And, Julia, take down my bed first. I'm going to lie down.

JULIA

Yes, ma'am. (*Turns quickly and knocks over the hat-stand.*)

FANNY

(*Furious—as Julia picks up the stand*) Oh, you clumsy little fool! Can't you be careful? (*Julia stares — then in a temper deliberately knocks over the hat-stand.*)

JULIA

I should worry about the damn thing!

FANNY

Julia!

JULIA

(Flounces across to the door — raises her voice angrily)
I'm leaving you anyhow, and I might as well make it now. *(Jerks open the door)* And you can look for a new chauffeur, too, because — *(tossing her head emphatically)* I'm taking — yours — with me! *(Goes out slamming the door.)*

FANNY

Oh-h-h-h! *(She collapses ungracefully on the sofa.)*

CURTAIN

THREE IS COMPANY

CHARACTERS:

JAMES POTTER

MRS. POTTER

CLIFFORD ROCHE

MRS. ROCHE

DALLAS

TIME: THE PRESENT

SCENE: DRAWING-ROOM IN THE POTTER HOUSE, NEW
YORK

THREE IS COMPANY

(A consciously elegant room, costly and in excellent taste but without individuality. At the rear center and at lower right are two large windows with velvet hangings drawn. At lower left a sofa diagonally facing a massive fireplace — a table with smoking paraphernalia next to it. Lower right, near window, a chair, and right center a large table with an arm-chair. Right of rear window, a grand piano and bench and an Italian floor-lamp. At upper left a doorway leads to the hall.)

(Potter is discovered sitting at the table pretending to read a magazine. He is in evening clothes and fidgets occasionally with his collar. A strong, sane-looking man of about forty with a sense of humor. Mrs. Potter is sitting on the arm of sofa left, facing him, smoking a cigarette. An extremely pretty young woman — she is wearing a daring evening gown of white and silver, a necklace and ear-rings of pearls. There is an air of carefully studied smartness in her speech and manner as well as in her appearance.)

MRS. POTTER

I don't think there is anything more to be said. We ought both to look at it sensibly, and there would be no use of waiting until things became worse — as they surely would.

POTTER

(Putting down his magazine) So you want a divorce!

MRS. POTTER

I can't see any other way out. With the best will in the world, neither one of us could bridge the gulf that separates us. But there is nothing to be gained by further discussion. It isn't a pleasant subject.

POTTER

Not exactly, no. Still you don't seem to be suffering particularly.

MRS. POTTER

(*Taking a puff of her cigarette*) I have been thinking about it so long, I can discuss it now without emotion. To me it is just a very serious and a very necessary thing. But it must have come as a great shock to you. After all, there is no cause for bitterness between us. If we drop the subject now, it will spare you a great deal of worry.

POTTER

How nice of you! Always thinking of me. Well, (*sighs*) you've always had your way in everything, I suppose in the end you'll get your divorce, too.

MRS. POTTER

You are taking it calmly enough yourself. I daresay you have had the very same thing on your mind.

POTTER

Hardly! I've had a lot of things on my mind of late, but divorce isn't one of them. (*Reflectively*) You know, we *might* talk this over a little longer though. Of course there is nothing very startling about a divorce, still it

doesn't happen to every man every day. And another thing — it's an awful nuisance. I'm pretty busy these days and there's so much red tape — lawyers, documents of all kinds, newspaper interviews — I'm not sure I have the time to be divorced just now.

MRS. POTTER

(*Coldly*) Are you trying to be funny?

POTTER

Heavens no! But all these things have to be considered. Then there is this — I should probably have to pack my trunks and move. Unfortunately, I can't think of anything but desertion as an excuse, and that's a long process. It's funny how ignorant a man can be about some matters until he actually experiences them. Now I haven't the least idea how long I would have to stay away before you could bring suit. There's incompatibility — that's really what we're suffering from, isn't it?

MRS. POTTER

(*Irritably*) I wish you wouldn't take that tone!

POTTER

I could tangle myself up with some woman, I suppose.

MRS. POTTER

Oh, you're disgusting!

POTTER

Well, it would be quick — and sure. It could be done easily enough.

MRS. POTTER

(*Furiously*) Oh! I won't listen to you any longer.
(*Rises and goes to fireplace.*)

POTTER

Ah, there's an idea — mental cruelty! That's used quite frequently. I am sure it would be a little quicker than desertion. I don't like desertion anyway. It wouldn't be in the least complimentary to you.

MRS. POTTER

That would annoy you, of course.

POTTER

Yes, it would. Besides, I have my own pride to consider. I don't want my friends to think I married a girl who had to be deserted. Why, what does one naturally think of a woman whose husband up and leaves her? That she is either ill-tempered, or uninteresting, or — bad!

MRS. POTTER

(*Turning*) How dare you?

POTTER

Oh, you're not, of course. But that's what they *would* think, just the same. Now listen, Petty —

MRS. POTTER

(*Angrily*) Don't call me Petty!

POTTER

Very well, then, my dear Eleanor! Are you sure there isn't some *particular* reason for wanting this divorce?

MRS. POTTER

(*Comes back and sits on sofa*) Just a million little reasons that make up one very good big reason. We are not suited to each other. It is quite useless to —

POTTER

There is no other man in the case?

MRS. POTTER

So you are determined to be nasty!

POTTER

That isn't answering my question.

MRS. POTTER

(*Frigidly*) Well, then, there isn't! — Jealous of anyone in particular?

POTTER

My dear child, how *could* I be jealous? While you still belonged to me I trusted you too much for jealousy — that's nothing but suspicion anyway — and now that I have no further claim on you I have no right to be jealous.

MRS. POTTER

No further claim! We are still man and wife!

POTTER

Legally, yes. But our marriage wasn't just a paper contract, to *me!* (*She drops her eyes, a little ashamed.*) You divorced me by what you said this evening — all the lawyers and judges in the country couldn't make it more binding.

MRS. POTTER

(*Takes the offensive in desperation*) You are too willing, Jim, to be convincing. What about another *woman* in the case?

POTTER

Would you mind calling me "James?" (*She glares — he laughs.*) And what woman? Mrs. Roche?

MRS. POTTER

Don't be absurd!

POTTER

And why not? *You* admire her tremendously, don't you?

MRS. POTTER

Anne Roche is a very dear friend of mine.

POTTER

"That doesn't disqualify her as a co-respondent. She's clever, smart, rich, a social power, envied and courted by hundreds of undomestic and ambitious women. You cultivated her yourself, and our intimacy, or rather *your* intimacy with the Roches is the thing you're more proud of than anything else. You know that's true.

MRS. POTTER

Perhaps! There is nothing wrong in a desire to make social headway. Our life, our friends, were not congenial to me. There was nothing satisfying about them. I am not ashamed to say that I tried to change all that. Just the same, there is a very genuine friendship between Anne Roche and myself.

POTTER

Well, then, the Roches and the life they lead represent what you consider decidedly worth while. Because I didn't agree with you on that score you made up your mind to go on without me. If I agreed with you about *Mrs. Roche* wouldn't that help a little?

MRS. POTTER

But you couldn't! Why she's years older than I am, and — she is not very good-looking.

POTTER

She's as good-looking as her husband — and not *much* older.

MRS. POTTER

What has that to do with it?

POTTER

(*Rises and paces the floor slowly — seriously*) Simply this: When I spoke of another man I had Clifford Roche in mind.

MRS. POTTER

Ridiculous! Whatever put that into your head?

POTTER

Well, he's everything you wanted me to be — and canned me for not being. His clothes are more to him than a means to warmth and modesty, his *clubs* are not merely a side-issue to his business — that is, they wouldn't be if he had a business. He dances beautifully, he talks well and easily, altogether he's a smart, confident man of the world.

MRS. POTTER

(*Contemptuously*) So that is why you had him in mind! Has it ever crossed your brain that there may be one or two other men in the world whose rough edges had been filed down?

POTTER

Yes, but to my knowledge, Clifford Roche is the only man, rough-edged or smooth, with whom you ever went motoring to a roadhouse luncheon. (*She gasps — puts her hand to her mouth*) Yes, I knew all about it. Didn't you want me to know?

MRS. POTTER

(*Agitated*) Why not?

POTTER

And it was just a coincidence that I was supposed to be in Boston on that day.

MRS. POTTER

Supposed to be!

POTTER

Yes, I wasn't. There was nothing prearranged about that little jaunt?

MRS. POTTER

(Defiantly) Certainly not! And if you were not so hopelessly crude and narrow you would never have given it a second thought. It was all so unimportant, so meaningless, so — usual, that I never thought of mentioning it.

POTTER

That's all right, then. Let's drop it. *(He goes back to table, sits and picks up his magazine. She is relieved.)*

MRS. POTTER

(Listlessly — after a pause) They should be here any minute.

POTTER

Who?

MRS. POTTER

Why Anne and Clifford, of course!

POTTER

By George, I had forgotten all about that confounded party. Just a minute ago I was trying to think why I was all dressed up. *(Takes out his watch)* Ten o'clock! Of all the unholy hours to go to a dance!

MRS. POTTER

Bourgeois, as usual! You seem to take a pride in it.

POTTER

I know. But at least we might have gone by ourselves — with a garage full of cars. It's only a short way, you might have stood it alone with me that long.

MRS. POTTER

Pathetic, isn't it?

POTTER

(*Drawling*) Ye-e-eah! Blowing in on a smart party with the Roches may have a tremendous social value, but as you said before, they are not very good-looking. I am beginning to take great stock in appearances.

MRS. POTTER

(*Hotly*) I didn't ask them to stop for us!

POTTER

No, of course not. Not in so many words. (*She glares — he, brightens*) After all, it's not such a bad idea, this shin-dig tonight. They might have something I could eat. I'm as hungry as a wolf!

MRS. POTTER

(*Gazing into the fire*) I didn't mean to say any more, but *that* is one of the million little reasons I spoke about before. Always grumbling about your food. Tonight you turned up your nose at a perfectly cooked and perfectly appointed dinner and wouldn't eat a thing. You never consider that without me this would be a very different household.

POTTER

I admit you order the meals beautifully, but they are just not things I am used to eating. They're not the sort of dinners we had when we were first married.

MRS. POTTER

I suppose you would be better satisfied with ham and eggs!

POTTER

(*Amused*) Ham and eggs! — for dinner! My dear, how disgusting!

MRS. POTTER

You can't understand anything that isn't just plain middle-class. Why, you're — you're just an anarchist!

POTTER

Middle-class! I like the word "middle." It suggests nice comfortable things — poise, balance, "The Happy Medium," "The Golden Mean" and all that. As for food, it isn't the long subdivided dinners I object to — I had one or two of those in my youth, you know — it's what makes up the dinner. Take that canapé, for instance. I love a stuffed egg, but not under a thick disguise of "Lord-knows-what." It's cruelty to unborn animals. Just so with the salad, the entree, the vegetables — sauce, sauce, sauce, all over everything an inch thick! Masquerading; hypocritical food. I don't like it in my own home. I don't mind at the Roches, I'd somehow expect to get it *there*.

MRS. POTTER

So you have come back to that subject again! Please understand, it is no longer necessary that we should hold the same opinions about people. Anne Roche is my very good friend, whether you approve or not!

POTTER

Rubbish! It's the most unnatural friendship in the world!

MRS. POTTER

Indeed! I should like to know why. We have the same tastes, the same interests, the —

POTTER

(Earnestly — leaning toward her) You are no more like her than a good green head of lettuce is like that salad you ate tonight. The difference between you and the Roche woman is just the difference between realism and nature. You have made yourself into a lovely image of the worldly woman, slapped a veneer of smartness all over you so that not a speck of you shows anywhere. You have coated your manners and your speech, your body and even your thoughts with it. It's a splendid and realistic piece of work, but the Roche person—why, that stuff sprouts out of her all over. She has always been that way, she simply can't help herself.

MRS. POTTER

Jim, if people always stayed as they were born, if they didn't fight against conditions, if they didn't dig themselves out of their ruts, what sort of a world would it be?

Abraham Lincoln would have split rails to his dying day. In your business, if you hadn't been ambitious, if you hadn't copied other people, where would you be?

POTTER

That's true enough!

MRS. POTTER

(*Encouraged*) Well, then, because my advantages were few as a girl and the people I knew were crude and plain and uninteresting, wasn't it natural that I should try to climb above that? All the refinement and polish of the world above me were just so much more desirable because they didn't belong to *my* world.

POTTER

Refinement, polish — yes, I can understand that. But (*rapping on the table*), now here is a perfectly good walnut table. I might have it sandpapered, I might have it polished if it needed it, but I *wouldn't* smear it all over with paint. The beauty of wood lies in the grain, and that's true of a woman. If I knew how to scratch the paint off you I'd do it. Sometimes I think a spanking would help!

MRS. POTTER

(*Scornfully*) That's all that is lacking. How it would satisfy your middle-class nature if you beat me! (*Bell rings.*)

POTTER

What's that? Ah, yes, I forgot. The Roches! How I hate that crawly name! It always reminds me — under the kitchen sink! — that sort of thing.

MRS. POTTER

(*Rising — witheringly*) Under the kitchen sink! — where you belong!

DALLAS

(*Appears at the door*) Mr. Roche!

(*Roche enters — he is about Potter's age, rather beefy and dissipated but well-groomed and not bad-looking. He is wearing a smart coat and carries his silk hat and cane. He has an easy, delicately superior manner and speaks the most approved Anglo-Manhattanese.*)

ROCHE

Hello!

POTTER

(*Rises*) Good-evening, Roche!

ROCHE

(*Turning to Mrs. Potter*) By Jove, you're more stunning every time I see you!

MRS. POTTER

(*Visibly pleased*) Hush! Don't be absurd.

ROCHE

(*To Potter*) Hope you don't mind my noticing it.

POTTER

(*Pleasantly*) Mind? Why should I monopolize my wife to that extent? I believe a pretty woman like any other work of art should belong to the public.

ROCHE

You're right, old man!

POTTER

(*Dryly*) I thought you'd agree to that! Isn't Mrs. Roche coming in? (*Roche is puzzled.*) I'll go and get her. (*Crosses to door.*)

MRS. POTTER

(*Sharply*) Jim, how ridiculous!

POTTER

Nonsense! I hate these early parties. It can't be more than ten-thirty. (*Goes out — Mrs. Potter sits on arm of sofa, troubled — Roche crosses, lays his hat and cane on the table and sits on the edge of it.*)

ROCHE

Can't make me mad! I'm all for cutting it short anyway and blowing on to the Carlton Roof. Have a better time. What do you say? (*Mrs. Potter is silent — he looks up*) I say, what's the trouble?

MRS. POTTER

(*Disturbed*) Oh, Cliff — he knows about! — last Wednesday!

ROCHE

Now what the deuce happened last Wednesday?

MRS. POTTER

(*Impatiently*) Oh, the Brixton Inn! He wasn't in Boston at all. I don't know how he found out.

ROCHE

Whew! That's sort of poor, all right! (*Pause*) You don't think he's apt to — ah —

MRS. POTTER

Oh, I don't! — he's not as uncouth as all that — but — (*passionately*) Oh, Cliff, how I loathe all this pretense!

ROCHE

Why pick on pretense? We couldn't get along without it.

MRS. POTTER

I told him tonight I wanted a divorce. I don't like the way he took it.

ROCHE

(*Astonished*) You told him what?

MRS. POTTER

I can't see why you should be so surprised. You had enough to do with it. (*Irritably*) You forgot what happened last Wednesday. I suppose that includes all the things you said last Wednesday!

ROCHE

But I say, Pet, you do travel a bit fast. You know a fellow isn't divorced and remarried every day. There's

a lot to be considered before taking a leap like that. Now listen to me, Pet — (*Crosses, leans over her and pauses a moment, then takes her in his arms and kisses her.*)

MRS. POTTER

(*Earnestly — holding him off*) Cliff, you have simply got to stand by me now. It's done! I can't live with him any longer.

ROCHE

(*Coaxingly*) But you mustn't be too hasty about it, little girl. You might spoil it all. Let it drop awhile.

MRS. POTTER

Do you think I could go on living here with him after this? I've got to go through with it.

ROCHE

He'd be willing enough to have you drop it.

MRS. POTTER

(*Tremulously*) That's just it. It doesn't seem to make any difference to him one way or the other. (*Voices are heard outside — she pushes him away*) Go back! They are coming! (*Roche crosses to table — enter Mrs. Roche, followed by Potter. She is a woman in the forties, well-made-up rather than well-preserved — her hair is elaborately dressed and she is wearing an evening wrap of gorgeous design and material — in speech and manner she closely resembles Roche.*)

MRS. ROCHE

(*Looking from Roche to Mrs. Potter*) Well, you *are* a doleful pair! What's wrong? (*Sits on sofa with Mrs. Potter.*)

ROCHE

(*Lightly*) Nothing wrong.

MRS. ROCHE

(*Raising her eyebrows*) And you twenty feet from the nearest woman!

ROCHE

Fact is, we're a bit bored.

POTTER

(*Standing center rear — smiling*) Oh, not with each other, I hope!

ROCHE

We've decided that we need some real amusement tonight and we propose a windup at the Carlton Roof — just a cozy foursome. We don't feel any particular keenness for the old Ridgways and their heavy parties anyway.

MRS. ROCHE

That was *your* idea, Cliff. Always bored when you're away from the rabble.

POTTER

(*Innocently*) Besides, one isn't obliged to like one's friends particularly.

ROCHE

(Stands up — laughs) Well, I suppose that settles it and we lose.

POTTER

Oh, no, I'm quite ready for anything. I am feeling sort of informal and chatty myself this evening. The Carlton Roof suits me all right, or any old place for that matter — the Brixton Inn, for instance! *(Mrs. Potter starts — Roche affects amusement.)*

MRS. ROCHE

Oh! *(Looks at Potter)* You're not serious, surely!

POTTER

(Blankly) Why not?

MRS. ROCHE

(Incredulously) Do you mean that awful place near — That roadhouse!

ROCHE

And pray, what do you know about that "awful place."

POTTER

(Coolly) Oh, we've been there.

ROCHE

What!

POTTER

Oh, not together, of course. But surely everybody has been there. In fact, it has come to be almost *too* — ah — usual a thing to be interesting. But I thought —

MRS. POTTER

(*Rising — agitated*) Jim, you are getting tiresome! Shall we go?

POTTER

But, my dear, Roche and I are entitled to some consideration, and it would be such a novel experience to visit the Brixton Inn with our own wives. What do you say, Roche?

ROCHE

(*Walks slowly up stage — leans against piano — Potter takes his place at the table*) I think I know what you're driving at, Potter. It is rather awkward and absurd and all that, but there is nothing to be gained by carrying this "comedy" any farther. Suppose you come out with it. Let's be quite frank and have it over with.

MRS. POTTER

(*Turning*) Wait! Anne, I am sorry to have this disgusting scene occur in my house, but you know how little I am responsible for Jim's actions. He has his own way of doing things, and what he is trying to blunder up to, is simply this: Last Wednesday morning I happened to meet Clifford on the Avenue. It was a perfect day and he asked me to take a spin with him. We motored out to Jamaica and on the way back stopped at the Brixton Inn for luncheon, and Clifford dropped me at my dress-maker at five. Because I failed to give Jim an exact account of my movements for the day he was pleased to make a row about it this evening. I hope he is satisfied with the humiliation he has brought on me and that we can drop it right here.

MRS. ROCHE

(*Raising her eyebrows*) Dear me, I hope I am not expected to faint or go into hysterics over this. Cliff is forever doing these things and I don't object in the least. It gives him something to do.

ROCHE

(*Encouraged*) I'm beastly sorry this happened. I wish you had spoken to me about it first, Jim.

POTTER

(*Easily*) Quite so. Now that suggestion you made a few minutes ago, that we be "quite frank and have it over with," was rather a good one, Roche. (*Takes a letter from his pocket and unfolds it slowly*) May I read this? It is dated Tuesday, and it begins — "Pet Dearest!"

MRS. POTTER

(*Takes a few steps toward him — excitedly*) But I *burned* that note!

POTTER

Yes, this is just a typewritten copy made before the conflagration. (*Mrs. Potter subsides into chair right — Roche studies his shoes in embarrassment*) — "Pet Dearest!" (*Looks up at Roche reprovingly*) Oh, she doesn't like to be called that! (*Goes on with the letter*) "Why not make tomorrow a regular day? Will meet you quite by accident at the Ritz at eleven o'clock. We needn't confine ourselves to telling our troubles, although I have as much to tell as you had the other night. Great things grow out of little ones every day — perhaps our few

hours together will take us a long way to freedom. Yours always (*you know how*), C." Hm! (*Still looking at the letter*) Neat—crisp—cagy — altogether to the point! (*Mrs. Potter sits with face averted — Roche makes a gesture of impatience.*)

MRS. ROCHE

(*Rises and crosses to Potter*) I can't commend your methods, Mr. Potter. I assume, however, this is your first appearance as "the injured husband," and first performances always lack finish. But you have been most convincing. I am sorry to see you and your charming wife so upset by this little episode, but while it scarcely seems to warrant a separation between the Potters, I find it makes a separation between the Potters and the Roches inevitable, quite! (*Turning to Mrs. Potter*) My dear, you have made a perfect climb of it, socially — considering your handicap — I do hope you will get down safely! Good-bye! Come, Cliff, it must be quite late. (*Goes out languidly — followed by Roche.*)

POTTER

(*Reflectively*) Spoken like a true friend! (*He sighs contentedly, takes the chair at table — picks up magazine — looks over the top at Mrs. Potter.*)

MRS. POTTER

(*Rises, goes to table and leans across it — vehemently, forgetting her cultivated manner completely*) Jim Potter, you make me so darned mad I could bust your head for you!

POTTER

(*Delighted — puts down the magazine*) Petty!

MRS. POTTER

Of all the clumsy blundering fools the world ever saw, you are the worst!

POTTER

(Rises) Petty! This is the best news I've ever had!

MRS. POTTER

Don't you touch me! Oh, the shame of it! You brute! — to put me in a position like that!

POTTER

(Goes toward her — she backs away) I knew it couldn't last! I knew it!

MRS. POTTER

(Staring) Will you please tell me what there is to be happy about?

POTTER

Why, Petty, you're breaking through your paint all over! It's coming off in chunks. You haven't bawled me out just like this in two years!

MRS. POTTER

(Weakening — tearfully) Let me alone, you ruffian! Don't you touch me! *(Turns, runs across, throws herself on sofa and bursts into tears)* I hate you! I hate you! I —

POTTER

(Crosses to center) There, don't cry. You are going to have your freedom anyway, and there are better men

than Cliff Roche in the world. Without me as a handicap I daresay you will find your way back among the right people quickly enough. I'm sorry you missed out on the party.

MRS. POTTER

(*Sobbing*) Don't be a nut! As if that meant anything compared with what you've done!

POTTER

(*Sits on arm of sofa*) It's funny how we get on each other's nerves. We are just a plain married couple when we ought to be good friends at least! You know, I've been thinking — the old saying — "Two is company, three's a crowd" — there is nothing truer than that when two people are engaged. After they are married it is just the opposite. Three is company, *two's* a crowd! I believe that's our whole trouble, we should have had a youngster.

MRS. POTTER

(*Sitting up*) Oh, how can you talk about that now!

POTTER

Oh, I wasn't suggesting that we have a youngster. I may be crude but I'm not immoral! I merely meant we *might* have had one, and if we had things would have been different.

MRS. POTTER

(*Pitifully*) I suppose you blame that on me, too!

POTTER

Well, you didn't want one.

MRS. POTTER

I never said that. I didn't want a child the first year or two. (*Defiantly*) No man with any feeling would want his wife to go through that anyway!

POTTER

(*Getting up and crossing right*) Oh, well, it doesn't matter. It's too late now. There is just one thing to be settled before we separate — the money question. Right there I have some hard news for you, Petty. I'm sorry. (*Hangs his head*) There is very little money to dispose of!

MRS. POTTER

(*Sitting up very straight*) Do you mean — you're broke? (*Potter nods his head*) Why, I can't believe it!

POTTER

We have spent an awful lot.

MRS. POTTER

But — you never told me — I thought we had a lot of money! Jim, if I had only known —

POTTER

That's all right, it was all my fault. You can blame me for everything. I gambled and took chances when we really had all that was good for us. Of course it went against me.

MRS. POTTER

You haven't a cent?

POTTER

Oh, not as bad as all that. There is this house — it'll bring six or seven thousand a year furnished, but there won't be much else after I meet my obligations. Of course I shall make the house over to you, and I can easily make enough to keep myself. (*She stares into the fire — he looks at her stealthily*) (*After a pause*) Do you think you can manage on seven thousand? It will mean giving up a lot of things. (*She continues to ponder*) It's the best I can do.

MRS. POTTER

(*Turning to him — drops her head — brokenly*) I was only thinking — do you suppose — we could afford — a child on seven thousand a year?

POTTER

(*Explodes with delight — rushes across to her*) Petty! Do you mean that? No fooling? (*Takes her in his arms*) I knew I hadn't lost my little girl for good!

MRS. POTTER

(*Pushes him away gently*) Well, if I have to be poor I don't want to be poor all alone.

POTTER

(*Eagerly*) Listen — that was all a fake. We're not poor at all! I only said that to — well, I don't know just why, an inspiration, I guess. (*She turns away*) Won't you forgive me for that?

MRS. POTTER

Jim, how much of an income have you?

POTTER

About forty thousand.

MRS. POTTER

And we spent that every year, didn't we?

POTTER

Just about.

MRS. POTTER

Well, Jim, I have a suggestion to make. I haven't been happy here. Let's rent this house anyway and limit ourselves to say, — twelve thousand a year. Would you be willing?

POTTER

Willing? I'd be the happiest man in the world, but (*teasing*) what would the Roches think?

MRS. POTTER

(*Laughing*) Oh, darn the Roches! And, Jim, listen to me — (*pleading*) there wasn't anything very wrong about — last Wednesday.

POTTER

I know that. Do you think I would have acted as I did? I know it was all perfectly harmless.

MRS. POTTER

But it *wasn't*! He got awfully fresh — it gave me a horrible fright. I don't believe I meant a word I said this evening. I just said it because I had made up my mind to. Forgive me?

POTTER

(Leaning toward her) Fifty-fifty! *(Kisses her — she snuggles close to him.)*

MRS. POTTER

(After a pause — playing with his tie) Jim, are you still hungry?

POTTER

I'd forgotten all about it.

MRS. POTTER

Because if you are — we could — rob the ice-box!

POTTER

(Boyishly) Come on, that's the best idea you've had tonight! *(Takes her hand and pulls her from the sofa — stops)* Do you think IT *(pointing off stage)* will catch us?

MRS. POTTER

(Laughing) Dallas? He's probably out with his best girl. Come on! *(She stops at the door, leans against the jamb, laughs softly)* Jim, I have a shameful confession to make!

POTTER

Confession!

MRS. POTTER

Yes. This will be the first time I've set foot in that kitchen!

POTTER

(Pointing his finger at her warningly) Oh-h-h-h, Petty! You won't do that with your nursery, will you?

MRS. POTTER

Stop it! (*He starts to embrace her*) Go back and turn out the lights! We've got to save our money! (*She runs out as he switches off the lights — he follows her laughing.*)

CURTAIN.

DID IT REALLY HAPPEN

CHARACTERS:

EZRA WALLACE (Proprietor of the Palace Market)

GRACE WALLACE (his wife)

THE SPRITE

THE REV. WALTER DANA

MAMIE THOMPSON (Cashier of the Palace Market)

SCENE. LIVING ROOM OF THE WALLACE HOME —
EVENING.

DID IT REALLY HAPPEN

(An old-fashioned, comfortable room with plush-covered, walnut furniture. At right, down-stage, a table with a fringed rep cover, a green-shaded lamp and a work-basket. An armchair stands at either side. At the left, diagonally facing the audience, a sofa, decked with white, crocheted antimacassars. In the right upper corner, a what-not, equipped with sundry Victorian atrocities. In the center of the rear wall a door leads to the street. It is flanked by windows. At the upper left a wide doorway leads to the dining room. Ezra Wallace is seated at the right of table. He is a big man of florid complexion, blunt and blustering. He is in his shirt-sleeves, his coat hanging over the back of his chair. He is obviously disgusted at the prospect of an evening at home.)

EZRA

(Looking down at his shoes) Hey, mother!

MRS. WALLACE

(Off-stage) Yes, Ezra, what is it?

EZRA

Bring me my slippers, will ya?

MRS. WALLACE

Yes, just a minute, Ezra. *(He begins to unlace his shoes — Mrs. Wallace enters with slippers, crosses and sets*

them down before him.) There you are! (He jerks off his shoes with an effort and puts on his slippers — she sits at left of table and busies herself with the work basket) I'm so glad you're not going out tonight!

(She is a meek little woman with a gentle conciliatory way of speaking. She is wearing an apron over a plain gingham dress.)

EZRA

(Grumpily) Huh! There's no place to go!

MRS. WALLACE

Now that isn't nice. You ought to be glad to have a cozy home to come to, evenings, like other men are. I was so afraid you were going out tonight, but I didn't want to ask for fear you'd be cross, so I was — I was real glad when you called for your slippers.

EZRA

Well, I'm glad *somebody's* glad! *(Suddenly suspicious)* Say, what's the matter anyway? Somebody's birthday, or anniversary — or something?

MRS. WALLACE

(Ill at ease) No, but you see, the minister said he might drop in tonight for a few minutes.

EZRA

(Sarcastically) The minister! He'll overwork himself, going out nights, if he don't take care. He's got my permission to call here any time he wants to — in broad daylight!

MRS. WALLACE

He wants to see *you*, Ezra.

EZRA

(*Seriously*) Look here now, mother! I don't mind *you* lecturin' an' scoldin' at me an' tellin' me to mend my ways, but I won't stand for no outsider! My ways is my own and I'll mend 'em or break em,' as I see fit, and (*slapping the arm of his chair*) I won't go to church!

MRS. WALLACE

Oh, it's not that, Ezra — but you know about the new church, and everybody is giving *something* to the fund, and — well, that's what he wants to see you about.

EZRA

Money, of course! And you ain't ashamed to frame a hold-up like that on your own husband!

MRS. WALLACE

Dear me, Ezra, I should think you would look at it as a matter of business.

EZRA

I'm running a meat-market. A new church won't help *my* business.

MRS. WALLACE

They are going to publish the donations in the Clarion-News. There won't be a prominent business man in town off that list. Mr. Murphy of the State Street Market subscribed twenty-five dollars — now, you know how people would talk if you didn't!

EZRA

(*Martyred*) Well, if Murphy gives twenty-five bucks, I got to do it, too, I s'pose. Publish the list in the Clarion-News, hah? All I got to say is, that preacher is wasting his time — he should a been a business man!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Mournfully*) And 'specially *now*, I would have been so ashamed if you'd have refused. I didn't want to mention it to you, Ezra, but it has been mighty hard for me lately — the scandal about your carryin's-on. It used to be only about your not going to church and working for the saloons in the last election and all that, but now! — only yesterday I heard it again!

EZRA

Heard what?

MRS. WALLACE

About your carrying-on with that awful woman — that Thompson girl!

EZRA

(*Angrily*) See here now, mother, I don't allow no interferin' in my business affairs. Mamie Thompson is workin' for me, and she's worth her money, too! She's the best little cashier an' book-keeper in this town, an' there's three people been tryin' for six months to get her away from me.

MRS. WALLACE

I don't doubt she's all right in her place, Ezra, but the other night you took her down to that place at the beach and everybody knows about it. That hasn't anything to do with your business.

EZRA

What of it? (*Sarcastically*) I suppose *you'd* a gone, if I'd a asked you to!

MRS. WALLACE

Why, of course not! Where they dance and sell liquor and everything? — you couldn't expect *that!* But if you *had* to go, why couldn't you go with some of the other men?

EZRA

(*Witheringly*) I am not in the habit of dancing with members of my own sex!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Lays down her mending — mournfully*) Oh dear, I'm so discouraged and upset about it. The worst of it is, she looks so terrible. She talks so loud and she dresses so loud — why, Ezra — she's just plain common!

EZRA

That's it! Because she's got some ginger to her and can talk to a man without suckin' her thumb, she's common! (*Leans across table*) All I c'n say is, if *she's* common — so am I! — that's as common as *she* is!

MRS. WALLACE

Oh, how can you say such a thing!

EZRA

An' what's more, I wish you was a little bit like her!

MRS. WALLACE

(Shocked) Ezra!

EZRA

If you was a little bit up to date — if you had some “go ” to you, things would be different. I ain't a canary bird to be hung on a hook an' have a rag tied around my cage at night! *(Dramatically)* I got a nachur that needs companionship! — an' you ain't got a laugh left in ya!

MRS. WALLACE

And whose fault is that? *(Turns away — holds back her tears)* When I think how it used to be — you were glad enough then to be a canary bird, and you used to set me on your knee, and — *(choking)* — you used to call me Chick-abiddy!

EZRA

(Indignantly) I never did!

MRS. WALLACE

(Tearfully) Yes you did — you used to call me Chicka-biddy! And you never complained about anything — it's *you* that's changed. When I see other men — the minister, for instance, with his gentle ways — why he comes here of an afternoon and sits and talks and has his cup of tea, just as nice! Why can't you be like that, Ezra?

EZRA

I'd look fine behind the counter in the Palace Market, wouldn't I?

MRS. WALLACE

(Sighs) Ah, that's just it, — why does there have to be a Palace Market?

EZRA

(*Angrily*) That's right — bite the hand that feeds you!

MRS. WALLACE

Ezra!

EZRA

That's what I said — "bite the hand that feeds you!" Everything you get — your clothes, your food, the roof over your head — comes out of the Palace Market, and now it ain't good enough for you!

MRS. WALLACE

It isn't that, I'm not ungrateful. But oh, Ezra, it's such a pity you couldn't just have enough money to give up the business! There are so many noble things one can do with money — besides just spending it on one's self!

EZRA

I could crack safes for a living, I suppose!

MRS. WALLACE

Now, dear, you shouldn't say those things, even in fun.

EZRA

(*Leans back — disgusted*) All right, mother, I ain't good enough for you no more, but cheer up, your ideel will be here in a little while!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Still tearful*) Yes, and I pray that some miracle will happen to make you see the error of your ways!

EZRA

(*Mysteriously*) An' speakin' of ideels, there's goin' to be more than *one* callin' at this house tonight. (*Mrs. Wallace looks at him questioningly*) I guess there's room for the two of 'em in here.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Excited*) Ezra Wallace, what do you mean?

EZRA

(*Coolly*) I mean that Mamie Thompson is comin' here this evening an' she's about due now!

MRS. WALLACE

You're joking!

EZRA

What's funny about that?

MRS. WALLACE

(*Pitifully*) Ezra Wallace, have you no shame? What excuse can you have for bringing that woman here?

EZRA

Business! One of the things you don't know nothing about. It's the end of the month an' there's things to be gone over. You can do all the chaperooning you want to.

MRS. WALLACE

But why here?

EZRA

Because I ain't goin' to sit down in that cold store at night and work — like I used to. I like to know what I got a home for!

MRS. WALLACE

(Distracted) And the minister coming here, too!

EZRA

What of it? You an' me have lived together twenty years — I guess our two ideels can stand a few minutes together.

MRS. WALLACE

(Rises, crosses left) I can't believe it, Ezra! *(In despair)* Oh, only a miracle could set things right — and there hasn't been one in nearly two thousand years! *(Turns sharply)* Was that a knock?

EZRA

I didn't hear nothing. *(Pause — a faint knocking is heard at the door)* Yes, there's somebody! Sounds kind o' scared. That ain't Mamie.

MRS. WALLACE

It must be the minister! You'll be nice now, won't you, Ezra? *(Crosses to door — Ezra takes up a newspaper, sulkily — Mrs. Wallace opens the door — the Sprite is discovered — he appears as a pale, wistful youth, clad in a short, ragged gray tunic — his arms and legs are bare.)* Land sakes, alive!

EZRA

(Turning) Well, I'll be —— *(Rises)* Shut the door, mother, he's a looney!

SPRITE

(*Politely*) Oh no, I'm not!

EZRA

With them clothes on? What's the idea? Who are you, anyway?

SPRITE

Ah, that's a secret.

EZRA

Didn't I tell you?

MRS. WALLACE

Oh well, he looks harmless. You must be cold. Won't you come in a minute? (*The Sprite sidles through the door timidly — Mrs. Wallace closes it after him.*)

EZRA

(*Sarcastically*) Do you know yourself, who you are?

SPRITE

Oh, I know my name, but I can't tell you that. But I don't know exactly *what* I am.

EZRA

(*Still sarcastic*) I suppose you might pass for a human being?

SPRITE

(*Seriously*) Oh, I know I'm not *that*!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Frightened*) Mercy me! — it couldn't be a spirit, Ezra, could it?

SPRITE

(*Gratefully*) Yes, that's nearer to it. And yet, it isn't quite right either.

EZRA

Say, what kind of a game are you trying to put up on us, anyway? Call yourself one of them common, ordinary, *play-actin'* spirits, an' let it go at that.

SPRITE

Now, that's just what makes me so doubtful. If I *were* an ordinary spirit in a play I wouldn't have come in as I did — knocking at the door, and all that. I would have taken shape out of a haze — it's usually a *green* haze — or (*his voice rises dramatically*), I would have sprung up before you suddenly with a crash of thunder and in a flash of light!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Terrified*) Mercy me! (*She circles about in back of Ezra.*)

SPRITE

(*Wistfully*) Sometimes I think I'm only an idea.

EZRA

An idea! Well that's common enough! I have them things once in a while, myself.

SPRITE

(*Worried*) Oh, do you? Then of course I couldn't be that! (*Sighs*) It *is* trying!

EZRA

That's about enough for you. We don't care a rap who you are, anyhow! — just state your business and clear out!

SPRITE

I came to help you.

EZRA

And who asked you to?

SPRITE

Nobody. But sometimes when people are dissatisfied and when they are quarreling, I feel the call and I *have* to come — to help them!

EZRA

Ha! You look like a great help to me!

SPRITE

But I *can* be. You're not happy, are you? — either of you?

EZRA

Oh, is that so?

SPRITE

You are on each other's nerves and you have been quarreling all evening, haven't you?

EZRA

(*Angrily*) That's none of your business! (*Advances, but Mrs. Wallace holds him by the arm.*)

MRS. WALLACE

Don't, Ezra, he might hurt you!

SPRITE

No, I have really come to help. Wouldn't you rather be happy than quarrel and fight, always?

EZRA

Young feller, did you ever hear of a happy married couple that didn't fight?

SPRITE

Yes — and so many of them got their happiness just by knowing me.

EZRA

Gee, how you hate yourself!

SPRITE

But it's true! Why some of the cases were even worse than yours! — so I *know* I can help you.

EZRA

(*Scornfully*) I hope it isn't a painful operation.

SPRITE

Oh, not at all. (*Leans forward to see Mrs. Wallace*) Now, the one thing in all the world that doesn't satisfy you is *that*, isn't it? (*Points to Ezra*) If he were to be changed into such a man as you admire, you would be happy, wouldn't you?

MRS. WALLACE

Oh yes, I would!

SPRITE

And you! — if this woman were to lose all the things that annoy you so — if she were to stand before you, suddenly, the kind of woman you long for as your companion — would you be happy?

EZRA

(Derisively) It can't be done!

SPRITE

You don't believe me? *(Impressively)* Then look at me, both of you! *(They draw back, startled — he passes his hands slowly through the air)* You must not speak! — You must not say a word! — It is being done now! *(They cover their faces with their hands and stand as if turned to stone.) (Triumphantly)* Now, will you believe me? *(Laughs softly)* Good night! *(He slips quietly through the door — they come to, gradually — Ezra emerges meek and subdued, politely solemn in manner and voice — Mrs. Wallace has expanded into a bold and rather loud-voiced shrew.)*

EZRA

(Awe-stricken) My dear, something dreadful has happened!

MRS. WALLACE

(Jerking her hands to her hips) You said a mouthful!

EZRA

(Gasps) Grace! — I don't know what to say! You never used such expressions before!

MRS. WALLACE

This ain't the time for criticisin' my language. If you was a regular man you'd up and after that young feller and lay him cold for this!

EZRA

My dear, you know that mine is not a violent nature. What can brute force do that is not better done by fair and gentle reasoning? Besides, what has happened cannot be merely the youthful prank of a misguided human — I believe it is a judgment! — at once a punishment and a corrective for our sins.

MRS. WALLACE

I ain't conscious of having committed no sin, but if you are my punishment it must have been *murder*! My Gawd, am I really married to you?

EZRA

(Bewildered — moves toward the table — passes his hand across his forehead) It is beyond belief. Something dreadful has happened! *(Spies his coat on the chair and puts it on, smugly — hides his shoes under the table.)*

MRS. WALLACE

(Following him) If you say that again I'll pull your nose! *(Looking hard at him)* If you could see what *I* see, you'd think it was *worse* than dreadful. It's just *HELL*, that's what it is!

EZRA

(Sits in his chair — trying to humor her) My dear child, you are overwrought. Will you not sit here and talk

with me quietly? Perhaps we may find some way out of this deplorable situation.

MRS. WALLACE

(Leaning on the table) So that's your idea, is it? Me sit here and talk to you! — instead of takin' me out where there's something doin' and something to see! — I tell you, Ezry Wallace, I've stuck around here and done your house-work just long enough, and if you don't get a hump on you and show me some of the sights of this here town, I'll find somebody as will!

EZRA

(Startled) Grace!

MRS. WALLACE

Don't you "Grace" me! I mean it! *(Gives the work basket a vicious poke)* I s'pose that's what I'm cut out for, eh? — sewin' an' cookin' an' makin' the beds? Me that was born for the bright lights an' a life o' pleasure!

EZRA

(Pacificaly) You know I am not opposed to diversion — of the proper kind. Amusement is a very good thing — in fact it is just what you need, my dear. *(He has an idea)* I have it! I will play a game with you. Surely we have something of the kind in the house — a checker-board, or —

MRS. WALLACE

(Turns away, disgusted — then suddenly breaks into boisterous laughter and drops into her chair) Checkers! — Ain't you the live wire! — Checkers!

EZRA

(*Distressed*) Dear me! I am at a loss! (*He has another idea*) Ah, soon the good minister will be here. He will help me to find a way out.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Stops laughing*) Gee, I forgot about that! Well, I'll run along and let *you* pull the sob stuff. (*Rises and crosses left*) — (*a knock is heard — she stops.*)

EZRA

(*Rises*) That is he now. You may go to your room, my dear, I shall open the door.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Angrily*) You stay where you are! So you're ashamed to have your friends see me, eh? We'll see about that! (*Flounces to the door and opens it.*)

MRS. WALLACE

(*Sharply*) So it's you, is it?

THE REV. WALTER DANA

(*Enters — effusively*) My dear Mrs. Wallace, I'm sorry — you expected me sooner? (*She backs away — he stops, slightly nonplussed*) But there came to me tonight one of the flock for comforting and counsel, and — I — ah — (*an awkward pause — he decides to try again — looking about him brightly*) Happily there is no need for comforting at this peaceful hearth.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Impudently*) We ain't got no hearth — we got a furnace! (*She walks away.*)

REV. WALTER DANA

(*Stealing a frightened glance at Ezra — holds out hands to Mrs. Wallace*) Surely you are not going away!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Turns*) You come to see my husband, didn't you?

REV. WALTER DANA

(*Nervously*) Ah yes! But — ah — my mission tonight — ah — lies so close to your own heart, surely —

MRS. WALLACE

(*Jerking her head and her thumb in Ezra's direction*) There's your man. If you don't want to talk to it, leave it alone. I should worry! (*She goes out.*)

EZRA

(*Advances*) My good friend, your coming is providential. I am greatly distressed. (*Rev. Walter Dana draws back against the door — Ezra takes his arm and leads him down to the table*) Something unforeseen, and I may say, incredible, has occurred this evening. It is to you that I must look for strength and counsel. (*He ushers the dazed man into the chair at left of table and takes the other himself.*)

REV. WALTER DANA

You amaze me!

EZRA

(Solemnly) My good wife — *(Words fail him.)*

REV. WALTER DANA

She has told you the object of my visit?

EZRA

Ah yes! It was not that of which I was about to speak, but it can wait. The fund for the new church, was it not? Splendid, splendid! I trust every man in the community will do his best for that good cause. *(Rev. Walter Dana is speechless.)* May I ask what is the — ah — amount of the donation?

REV. WALTER DANA

(Nervously) That, of course, is not arbitrary. There are some who have but little to give. Then there have been very generous amounts — for an example — Mr. Murphy —

EZRA

Ah, I remember. Twenty-five dollars, was it not? *(Takes out his check book and fountain pen)* I shall make my donation now. *(He dates the check — politely)* And to whom shall I make the check payable?

REV. WALTER DANA

To me, personally, if you will.

EZRA

(Apologetically) And — ah — the — initials?

REV. WALTER DANA

Walter.

EZRA

Ah yes! *(As he writes)* The — Rev — Walter — Dana — *(He finishes it and waves it about in the air to dry)* This gives me great pleasure indeed. *(He hands over the check.)*

REV. WALTER DANA

(Glances at it — nearly collapses) One — Hundred — Dollars! I did not — expect — my dear friend — I — *(Gives it up)* You amaze me!

EZRA

It is nothing. I wish I might give more.

REV. WALTER DANA

And Mrs. Wallace will be so pleased. She knew you were intending to do this?

EZRA

(Starts — uneasy) No — that is to say — it reminds me — You observed her manner, how changed, how unlike herself? *(Rev. Walter Dana nods.)* It came over her in a moment. The circumstances were so unusual — I feel I had best not tell that.

REV. WALTER DANA

But if I am to help you, would it not be well to tell everything?

EZRA

(*Thinks hard a moment*) No, I am afraid not. I am not sure I believe it myself. After all, the important thing is that my poor wife has been afflicted, dreadfully, and that we must find some way to bring her back.

REV. WALTER DANA

Do you not think it may be in the way of illness?

EZRA

(*Feels he will get no help*) Yes — yes, I am sure it is that. She has overtaxed her strength. She has worked very hard of late and she would not listen to me when I remonstrated. (*Finishing the subject*) Yes, it is merely a mental illness, I am sure.

REV. WALTER DANA

(*Embarrassed*) But — ah — if you will permit me to say so, Mr. Wallace, — I have had little opportunity of meeting or observing you, but — (*brings it out finally*) Has there not been, perhaps, just a shade of, shall we say, change — in yourself?

EZRA

Perhaps, yes. But that is very different. For a long time I have been struggling inwardly — I realized the error of my ways, but my other and baser nature kept me from making confession of it. The saddest part of it all is that tonight, when I had finally conquered my obstinacy and was preparing to adopt frankly a right way of living — at that very moment, I might say, this ter-

rible thing came upon that poor woman — like a bolt from the blue, as it were. (*He shakes his head sadly — the Rev. Walter Dana strokes his chin — there is a loud knocking at the door.*)

EZRA

(*Coming to*) This is most annoying — I cannot imagine — (*He goes to the door, mumbling, and opens it — Mamie Thompson enters — she is a robust blonde, clad in a coat of startling plaid and a large red hat — she is carrying account books and loose sheets under one arm, and is chewing gum industriously.*)

MAMIE

(*Airily*) G'd evening, Mr. Wallace. 'M awful sorry 'm late, but one o' the boys dropped in after supper an' I couldn't shake him.

EZRA

(*Stares*) My good girl — I — (*points at the papers under her arm*) I had forgotten — dear me — this is most inconvenient. (*Coming to a decision*) If you will go into the dining room you may do your work there. (*Mamie stares, sees the Rev. Walter Dana — giggles, then breaks into loud laughter.*)

EZRA

(*Shocked*) Dear me, dear me! Miss Thompson, I beg of you!

MAMIE

(*Sidles up and nudges him confidentially*) You better look out, Mr. Wallace, he'll ketch on.

EZRA

(*Draws away*) I don't know what you mean.

MAMIE

Say, you're a scream. Kiddin' the minister! Honest, that's rich!

EZRA

(*Walks away from her — to the Rev. Walter Dana*) I am sorry. It is altogether an unfortunate evening. (*Stops at the table — solemnly*) I have come to a decision. Tomorrow I shall take steps to dispose of my business. Yes, I find it quite too unpleasant. What little wealth I have I shall devote to charity — to those in need of spiritual as well as material comfort. (*He sits — the Rev. Walter Dana nods his approval.*)

MAMIE

(*Her amusement has died — anxiously*) Say, you ain't sick are you, Mr. Wallace?

EZRA

(*Impressively*) I have *been* sick, but — (*lays his hand on his heart*) I am well at last! (*Mrs. Wallace enters left — she has pinned a rose coquettishly over one ear, has discarded her apron, and fastened a bright ribbon bow on her bodice.*)

MRS. WALLACE

Well, I'm sure glad to see you, Miss Thompson! (*Seizes her hand — Mamie's confusion is complete*) I been bored stiff round here tonight. Sit down and let's have a little visit before you get to work. (*Draws Mamie down to the sofa and sits beside her — Ezra is annoyed, the Rev. Walter Dana worried.*)

MRS. WALLACE

Say, that's a swell coat you got on! I don't know why but I never had 'ny sense when it come to pickin' out clothes. I'm goin' to get me one like that.

MAMIE

(*Leaning over confidentially*) Ain't you worried about Mr. Wallace? He don't seem — exactly right, does he?

MRS. WALLACE

(*Looking at Ezra*) It's terrible! I don't know what to make of it. Think I better get a doctor tonight, or wait till tomorrow? (*Rev. Walter Dana clears his throat, embarrassed*) Let's go in the other room, I want to talk to you about that. (*Rises and takes Mamie with her.*)

MAMIE

(*As they go out*) You know it's funny, Mis' Wallace, I never thought you was so — you know — sociable an' friendly, an' —

MRS. WALLACE

That ain't my fault. You should a come around sooner! (*They go out laughing.*)

REV. WALTER DANA

(*After a pause — rising*) Perhaps I had better go. I fear there is nothing more I can do.

EZRA

(*Rises also*) I do not know how to thank you. Your very presence has given me strength to face this great trial.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Bursts into the room — angrily*) What's this I hear about you wanting to sell out? Are you crazy? (*Shaking her finger at Ezra*) I wanna tell you something — I'm willing to put up with your whimperin' and simperin' till I get the doctors workin' on you — but I won't go to the poor-house! — not for you nor nobody like you!

EZRA

(*With dignity*) You would not have me continue an occupation like that — one that goes against my very instincts? When I think of it! — trading in the flesh of poor slain creatures. Only yesterday I myself took down from its hook the body of an innocent lamb, and (*shuddering*) I cut it into pieces! No, no, I must give it up — it is too much to ask!

MRS. WALLACE

You listen to me, Ezry Wallace, you're not only going to keep on selling meat, you're going to *eat* it! That's the whole trouble with you!

REV. WALTER DANA

(*Backing out*) I think perhaps I had better go.

MRS. WALLACE

For the first time tonight — you said something! (*He goes out in a panic*) Now, then, we'll settle this thing. Mamie! O Mamie! (*Mamie enters*) Come here a minute. Mr. Wallace will not be down tomorrow morning. I give you full charge of the business until further

notice. And pick me out a nice thick steak and send it up first thing.

MAMIE

Yes, Mis' Wallace.

EZRA

(*Asserting himself*) Miss Thompson, you are discharged!

MRS. WALLACE

Oh she is, is she? I got an idea she's been promoted, and I'm in a position to know. Now, Mamie, you'd better go home and get a good night's rest. (*Mamie goes out to get her coat and hat.*) Now, Ezry Wallace, you sit down there and I'll tell you what's what. (*Decisively*) First thing in the morning you're going down with me to see Dr. Smith!

EZRA

(*Politely*) I was about to suggest that, my dear. (*Consolingly*) I am sure there is nothing really serious in your condition.

MRS. WALLACE

My condition! You got the nerve to talk about *my* condition! If I ever had any doubt about *your* condition, that bone-head remark would settle it. (*Mamie enters and slips out without being seen.*) You're going right straight to bed!

EZRA

(*Rising*) Yes, my dear, be calm. If it will please you, I will go to bed. (*There is a knock at the door.*)

MRS. WALLACE

I'll answer that. (*Goes to the door, opens it, discovers the Sprite*) So you thought you'd come back, did you?

Come in. (*Shuts the door after him — menacingly*) I pretty near forgot about you, young fella. You got some tall explainin' to do — fine mess you made, didn't you? (*Ezra goes up stage, — timidly.*)

SPRITE

(*Smiling*) You are not satisfied?

MRS. WALLACE

(*Furious*) Satisfied! Ezry Wallace, did you hear that? Are you going to let that young loafer make fun of your wife?

EZRA

Gently, my dear, gently. Perhaps he will explain it all.

MRS. WALLACE

Explain nothing! I'll show him! (*Advances, but Ezra holds her back.*)

EZRA

(*Frightened*) Do be careful! You are but a frail little woman, and he — (*awed*) — he is not human!

MRS. WALLACE

I'm not afraid. Human or not human, he wouldn't dare strike a woman!

SPRITE

No, I wouldn't. — And it wouldn't help you to strike me, either. I came back to help you, *really* help, this time. Do you wish me to change you back again?

EZRA

(*Eagerly*) You can do that?

SPRITE

Yes, if you wish me to.

MRS. WALLACE

Then, in the name of Heaven, take that and make a man out of it. Make me a husband that'll support me and stand up for his rights. (*Entreating*) Make me a husband that can trim a lamb chop without snivelling!

EZRA

Ah no, I am content as I am. Take this poor woman and give her back to me as I remember her — gentle and patient and home-loving!

MRS. WALLACE

Nothing doing! You leave me be! I don't want to be changed.

SPRITE

Ah, that's the great trouble, alas! My power is limited. I can do but one of two things — leave you as you are, or change you both.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Disgusted*) I knew there was a catch in it some place.

EZRA

But why can you not change her alone?

SPRITE

(*Smiling*) Perhaps because you are man and wife—and therefore one. I am not sure, but I think that's the reason.

EZRA

(*Pitifully*) What are we going to do?

MRS. WALLACE

Ain't it terrible?

SPRITE

Perhaps I can help you decide. Have you been happier since I came the first time? (*They both make a gesture of dismay.*)

MRS. WALLACE

Everything's gone to smash since then!

SPRITE

Yes? Then why not let me change you both?

EZRA

(*Thinking*) It is the only thing to do. I am not satisfied, but for your sake, my dear, I will submit to it.

MRS. WALLACE

(*Resigned*) It's tough, but I can't stand you the way you are.

SPRITE

Then join your hands — and close your eyes — and do not speak! (*They obey him — he passes his hands through the air as before*) It is the last time — I can never

come back to you again — it is done! (*They open their eyes — and gaze at each other.*)

EZRA

(*Shaking himself*) Holy Smokes! — I feel like I'd been caught in a folding bed!

MRS. WALLACE

Oh, Ezra, I'm so delighted! It seems just like old times.

EZRA

(*Turning to the Sprite*) Now, my lad, you've had your fun. Suppose you tell us something about yourself before you go.

MRS. WALLACE

Yes, do!

SPRITE

Well — I've been thinking about it, and I believe — (*ruefully*) I believe I *am* only an idea, after all. I can't think of anything else that fits.

MRS. WALLACE

And your name?

SPRITE

(*Brightens*) Yes, I can tell you that now. (*Pauses — they listen eagerly*) My name is WELL-ENOUGH!

MRS. WALLACE

Well-enough?

EZRA

What?

SPRITE

(Repeats it impressively) My name is WELL-ENOUGH — and all I ask is to be let alone!

EZRA

Can you beat that!

MRS. WALLACE

(Sincerely) Oh, I'm sure we will — I'm sure we'll let you alone, after this!

SPRITE

Then I *have* helped you! But I knew all the time, I would — and I'm glad. I'm glad I'm alive, even if I'm not quite sure what I am. *(He opens the door.)*

EZRA

(Kindly) Won't you stay a little while?

MRS. WALLACE

Yes do, please!

I'm sorry. *(A far-away look comes into his eyes)* I feel another call — they need me, somewhere — I must go — Good-bye! *(He goes out — Mrs. Wallace, smiling, takes off her rose and the ribbon and smoothes out her dress — Ezra, in thought, pulls off his coat — suddenly remembers, and throws the coat violently to the floor.)*

EZRA

Ar-r-r-rgh!

MRS. WALLACE

Why what's the matter, dear?

EZRA

Matter! I give that parson — One — Hundred — Bucks!

MRS. WALLACE

Did you really? How splendid of you!

EZRA

Splendid! I must a-been crazy!

MRS. WALLACE

But, Ezra, just think how it will look in the Clarion-News! Mr. Ezra Wallace — one-hundred-dollars!

EZRA

By George, that's right! (*Chuckling*) And Murphy with his measly twenty-five! Can you see his face! I'll charge it to advertising and let it go at that. (*Sits in his chair — turns*) You know that was a queer business tonight!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Comes down and stands at the table*) It was. And I can't help wondering, now that I think of it — do you suppose — did it really happen?

EZRA

(*Thoughtfully*) Did it really happen? — Why sure! We was both here, and the parson, and Mamie, an' —

MRS. WALLACE

Unless —

EZRA

Unless what?

MRS. WALLACE

Unless we've been asleep. We might be dreaming it.
(*Ezra thinks it over*) — I wonder! (*She has a bright idea, leans over and pinches him sharply on the arm.*)

EZRA

(*Howling*) Ow-w-w-w! (*Comes back and gives her a vicious pinch on the leg.*)

MRS. WALLACE

(*Almost in tears*) Ezra Wallace, how can you hurt me like that! It's mean of you! (*Ezra glares at her — they both rub their hurts.*)

MRS. WALLACE

(*Has a thought*) But, Ezra, that proves it! We can't possibly be asleep!

EZRA

That's right, too. (*Worried*) But that makes it worse — it must have happened! Come here and let's talk it over — (*takes her on his lap*) — Chickabiddy!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Delighted*) Oh, Ezra, that's the first time in nearly twenty years you've called me Chickabiddy! (*Ezra looks sheepish.*)

EZRA

You know, I got an idea!

MRS. WALLACE

(*Looks around, frightened*) Oh hush, dear, you know *he* was an idea — maybe that wouldn't be letting him alone.

EZRA

That's right, I forgot. But I was just thinking — do you think it could just be — play-actin' — you know, — a show, or something like that?

MRS. WALLACE

(*Surprised*) Perhaps it is!

EZRA

Then it ought to be over pretty soon.

MRS. WALLACE

Yes. (*Leans forward and looks up — the curtain drops a little way and stops.*) It is, Ezra, look! — it's only a play — it's only a play! I'm so glad! (*She throws her arms about his neck and they keep their eyes glued on the curtain as it falls, slowly.*)

THE END

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